

The University of Chicago

SCHLEIERMACHER'S CONCEPTION
OF GRACE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

MARCH, 1945

By
RALPH G. WILBURN

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Purpose of the Work

My major concern in this thesis is fundamentally historical in nature. The reader is asked to remember that the dissertation is not intended to be a contribution in the field of the philosophy of religion, but as the title indicates in the field of historical Christian theology. In this latter area I am persuaded there is a definite need for this study of Schleiermacher's thought. It is true that Schleiermacher is a well known figure in theological circles; yet no one has turned the spotlight on his conception of grace, bringing the whole range of his thought in relation to the Christian doctrine of grace. It is primarily as a historian of doctrine that I have pursued this task in the conviction that theologians of today can only do their best thinking in the light of the past. In this spirit I have aimed to turn the spotlight on Schleiermacher's conception of grace, studying it in its historical connections and bringing to light the various aspects of its novelty.

Method

The method of procedure I have followed in this work is twofold: (1) To analyze Schleiermacher's conception critically, within the general context of his conception of religion; and (2) To view its basic features in sharper outline by comparing them with the major, historical formulations of the doctrine of grace which are involved in the exposition of Schleiermacher itself. A general characterization of Schleiermacher's conception

of religion seemed necessary due to the many-sidedness of Schleiermacher's thought. And I found a comparison of the major features of Schleiermacher's view with others which in one way or another are embedded in his thought to be helpful in bringing out the novelty of Schleiermacher's conception, which is a major concern of my thesis.

Major Features

Some of the more significant features of Schleiermacher's view which my study has brought to light are:

The feeling of absolute dependence.--Schleiermacher believed this feeling to be the essence of piety. It is the foundation for his Dogmatics. Subjectively, the thought-feeling complex implied by this notion preserves the passive or receptive attitude which is a constituent part of that religious experience designated by the term "grace." I have argued that Schleiermacher preserved this attitude throughout his entire development from the years spent among the Moravian Brethren to the period of the Glaubenslehre. This feeling, however, carried an objective reference also, though Schleiermacher was reluctant to deal with the arrow of this feeling which points to that upon which one is conscious of being dependent. Schleiermacher's subjective method causes a certain vagueness at this point, but the objective aspect is there; it involves Schleiermacher's conception of God.

Idea of God.--Schleiermacher's idea of God passed through several stages of development. Quite early he abandoned the idea of a personal God and never returned to it. Two major conceptions are reflected in the Reden, the Dialektik and the Glaubenslehre: (a) God conceived as the undifferentiated principle of world-antitheses; and (b) God conceived as cosmic Force or Vitality.

The former is attributable to the influence of Schelling; the latter to Leibnitz and Romanticism. Schleiermacher never fully reconciled these two different conceptions of Ultimate Reality. His doctrine of grace is derived in part from both ideas.

The content of grace.--The element of divine initiative in the idea of grace and the element of determinism in predestinarian grace particularly find clear expression in Schleiermacher's treatment of God conceived as the unconditioned condition and the conditioning unconditioned or the transcendent "Whence" of the world of finitude. Schleiermacher's determinism is a kind of philosophical version of Calvinism.

The other conception, however, is equally dominant, and God conceived as the Divine Causality, the "Everlasting Livingness of the world," becomes central in Schleiermacher's conception of the content of grace, particularly in the development of his Christology. With a degree of similarity to Augustine Schleiermacher interpreted the actual content of grace in terms of what I have called "a divine dynamis." Unlike his evangelical predecessors he found nothing in the personalistic notion of favor but the implication of an unbecoming anthropomorphic conception of God. Grace for him was the inspiring "impulses" of the divine, emanating from "the Eternal Fountain of Life." This "instreaming influence" (of the Reden) finds a Christocentric focus (in the Glaubenslehre) and becomes constitutive of the redemption effected by Christ, the only Redeemer, from whom derives "a continuous activity" productive of a heightening of the God-consciousness as the religiously determinative factor of the self-consciousness. This is redemption as Schleiermacher conceived it.

The centrality of Christ.--Against the philosophical background indicated by the above ideas Schleiermacher read the

Christian experience of Christ into the center of his world-view with amazing success. His method may thus be called empirical in the sense that he claimed to use the church's actual experience of redemption in Christ as the basis of his Dogmatics. He proposed simply to explicate that experience of grace from the point of view of the corporate religious self-consciousness of the Christian community. Yet of course, the whole was in part determined by his philosophical presuppositions.

Schleiermacher drew from this Christian consciousness a Christological norm midway between the views of Docetism and Ebionitism. He rendered his view of the person of Christ specific by regarding Christ in a twofold manner: (a) as an archetypal head and exemplar of humanity insofar as Christ is the only one whose self-consciousness was consistently and absolutely determined by an unwaning and unwavering God-consciousness; and (b) as the seat and source of soteriological power. The first of these interpretations guards against the heresy of Docetism; the second evades the error of Ebionitism.

That Christ is present as a "power" and not merely as an exemplary influence Schleiermacher proved by reference to the corporate life of the ongoing Christian community. The uniqueness of this power or dynamis of the Christian Pneuma consists in the empirical fact that it is constantly productive of a higher potency in the degree of the God-consciousness. The Christian Pneuma is therefore a historical working ("the peculiar activity" of the Redeemer), making itself known in the Christian community (a) by stimulating a heightened sense of existence, (b) by overcoming the limitations involved in a consciousness of sin, (c) by making possible the richest realization of personality in terms of

individuality, (d) by inspiring and fostering creative human community through a development of the principle of fellowship, and (e) by creating and nurturing a will for the Kingdom. This, according to Schleiermacher, is the life which constitutes one a member of the fellowship of Christ. This is the work of grace.

Schleiermacher's Christology was a mediating one between Rationalism on the one hand and Supernaturalism on the other. He believed Christ to be constitutive of the life of God, a God which stands over against man as a thinking being. Christ is therefore apprehensible initially only by faith. The relation of the natural to the supernatural is one in which the natural can reflect the supernatural, and the supernatural can become a natural fact of history. Yet that natural fact does not exhaust the supernatural. The Jesus of history can be understood as an object of scientific knowledge, but Christ the Redeemer remains to be grasped as an object of inner experience. The essential meaning of the Christ of faith for Schleiermacher was "eine Fülle von Lebenskraft und Freude." His Christology is a Christ-mysticism. The uniqueness of Christ lies in the potency of his God-consciousness. The qualitative difference between Christ and the rest of men is so great that it finally becomes a difference in type. Schleiermacher's Christology implies an evolutionary conception in which the ideal of individuality is central. The "excelling measure" of the God-consciousness in Christ was so superior that He was finally established "as head, universally animating and sufficient for the whole human race."

Justification.--The obliteration of transcendence in terms of favor or attitude led Schleiermacher to regard the Reformer's distinction between Justification and Sanctification (the Pauline

distinction between the grace of God over man and the power of the divine Pneuma in man) as a "todte Formel ohne lebendige Anschauung." Schleiermacher interpreted Justification not as an "event," but as a "process" whereby one is assimilated unto the powerful and empowering God-consciousness of the Redeemer. Schleiermacher's entire soteriology is organized about the notion of vitalistic, cosmic activity. The Christ-reality was interpreted in such terms.

The Sin-Grace antithesis.--The Sin-Grace antithesis is developed as the core of the Christian faith with great skill. Schleiermacher found his anthropological, Christian norm in a position midway between Pelagianism and Manicheism. There are, however, many shades and degrees in the scale which has these two anthropological outlooks as its two antithetical ends. The fluctuating factor of the God-consciousness is the key here. It always exists, Schleiermacher contended, as a part of the self-consciousness; but it fluctuates; its status is characterized by "more or less." In his philosophical approach Schleiermacher inclined to stress the "more"; while as a Christian theologian he stressed the "less." Thus out of this relative factor of "more or less" he finally developed a genuine antithesis and came to deal with "a genuine derangement of our nature," and with "a genuine incapacity of the spirit." This incapacity, he insisted, can only be overcome by the inspirational power of the Redeemer.

Accordingly, Schleiermacher had a fluctuating or twofold conception of grace. Philosophically he thought of it as a "power of completion," a power whereby the process of world-life is finally brought to completion. Grace is culminal in character. When he came to set forth sin as "a genuine incapacity," however,

he explicated grace as a power of "regeneration." But however much his thought moved back and forth at this point, grace was always conceived in terms of an inspirational power, whether culminal or re-generative in character.

Predestination.--Schleiermacher presented a skilful reduction of the predestinarianism of Calvinism to sociological formulae. The doctrine of election was interpreted as a historical working or calling. This makes possible an admirable resolution of the age-long difficulty involved in the particularism of predestinarian grace. Election is a historical calling, not a supra-historical, eternal decree. Schleiermacher thus recovers the universality of God's love without forfeiting the predestinarian element of absolute determination.

Grace and freedom.--The element of absolute determinism of predestinarian grace lives on in Schleiermacher's view, yet he never adequately solved the problem of free-will and determinism.

(a) In reference to the freedom of choice, there is no adequate treatment in Schleiermacher's works. He believed that such freedom was somehow compatible with his system of determinism; but he never clarified the nature of that compatibility.

(b) Schleiermacher, however, found ample room in his system of thought for freedom conceived in terms of the spontaneity of creativity, for he conceived the Ultimate in terms of just such quality. Hence, as he frequently asserted, what grace creates is altogether free. His philosophy of Romanticism led him to develop this notion of freedom elaborately.

(c) Closely correlated with freedom as spontaneity was Schleiermacher's dominant ideal of freedom from the bondage of finitude, freedom from that kind of devotion to any thing or system in the existential realm of finitude which would

prevent one from acting in harmony with the demand which Ultimate Reality (the Divine Causality) makes upon one. Schleiermacher conceived this demand in terms of unique Individuality. The ideal of unique Individuality expressed in the Soliloquies became central in Schleiermacher's conception of the telos of the working of the Christian Pneuma. In the Glaubenslehre however, it became more securely anchored in a communal context. The Christian Pneuma was there conceived as "a fellowship-forming power." The focal ideal toward which Schleiermacher was working is that of Individuality in Community: the richest and most highly integrated individuality within human community of the widest range.

Comparative Summary

Interpreting the content of grace as inspiration, and justification as a process, Schleiermacher stood close to Augustine's Neo-Platonic interpretation and apart from the personalism of Paul and the Reformers. With Paul and the Reformers Schleiermacher strongly opposed Augustine's refined doctrine of merit. Possibly like Paul, but unlike Augustine and the Reformers Schleiermacher reduced the particularism of the grace of election to the historical phase of the working of grace, preserving the absolute universality of God's love. Nearer to Paul also than were either Augustine or the Reformers (save Zwingli), Schleiermacher's view was free from every trace of sacramental grace. Like Luther and Paul, Schleiermacher's conception is Christocentric through and through, more so than Calvin's, Zwingli's and Augustine's. Perhaps closer to Paul than to any other save Luther was Schleiermacher's understanding of the reality of Christ in terms of a divine power to break the bondage of sin. There are

many distinctions between Schleiermacher and Paul at this point, to be sure; but whereas Calvin, for example, stressed the guilt of sin as a man's chief difficulty, Paul stressed the bondage under the "tyrants" of Sin and Death. In Schleiermacher's view "finitude" takes the place of these "tyrants," but the emphasis falls on the aspect of bondage.

The Novelty of Schleiermacher's View

Our comparison of Schleiermacher's conception of grace with those of his theological antecedents brought out clearly the novel aspects of Schleiermacher's view. This novelty may be characterized, from a historical point of view, by five aspects:

1. Grace was understood entirely in vitalistic or dynamic terms. Not a trace of forgiving favor remains. God is not cosmic will, but power, livingness, an inspirational dynamis.
2. Grace is essentially continuous with nature. Grace does not break into the world of sin and death (as in Paulinism), but it is integrally related to nature. Yet the fulness of grace is supra-rational, and supernatural if nature is equated with that reality apprehensible initially through reason. Schleiermacher knew a reality which though it is not contrary to reason nonetheless transcends it.
3. Grace was interpreted as a power beyond all forms of finitude. Schleiermacher made a great deal of the Romantic doctrine of an inner and outer truth. The inner working of the Divine Causality is the only absolute; all externalizations of that working inevitably take on certain distortions. Something is always lost when the experience of the mystic moment is expressed in the dimension of conceptualizations. The Divine Pneuma forever aims at, but never succeeds in finding

final or perfect expression in the existential realm. Under such a schema Schleiermacher interpreted the church, the historical person of Christ, the bible and all other dogmatic "expressions" of Christian piety, and the realm of existence in general in relation to the Divine Causality. This, in general, was his doctrine of transcendence.

4. Schleiermacher's exposition of the Sin-Grace antithesis tones down the stern realism in terms of which sin had been viewed by his theological antecedents. Sin was no longer conceived as a radikale Böse. It was viewed by Schleiermacher as a "not yet," a step in the process of an ultimately harmonious world-whole. In the last analysis sin is something negative; it has no positive status in reality. Such a toning down of a realistic view of sin toned down also the traditional evangelical doctrine of sola gratia. The antithesis was not viewed in such vivid contrast as that which prevailed in the views of Schleiermacher's theological predecessors.

5. Finally, Schleiermacher's conception is totally freed from the element of divine wrath. Schleiermacher's God transcends all antitheses, for He is defined as the undifferentiated principle of cosmic unity. There could therefore be no such antithesis in His nature as that between justice and mercy.

Criticisms

1. Schleiermacher's exposition is fraught with a certain ambiguity due to the fact that throughout he was operating with two conceptions of the Ultimate derived from different sources: (a) God understood as the undifferentiated principle of world-antitheses; and (b) God conceived as cosmic Force. Schleiermacher never completely harmonized these radically different ideas of God. In the Reden he was operating with the latter

idea; in the Dialektik he was working with the former idea; and in the Glaubenslehre he was operating with both ideas. This phase of the Schleiermacherian synthesis remained incomplete.

2. As for the Christological problem, it can hardly be said that Schleiermacher fully resolved all the difficulties. The approach to the figure of Jesus from the point of view of scientific historicism and the approach through the Christ of faith remain, in the end, unharmonized. And in asserting vigorously the doctrine of Christ's sinlessness, Schleiermacher seemed to be asserting more than was necessary for his soteriology which centered not so much in the person of Christ but rather in the substratum of the divine dynamis which welled up in historical process at that point. Nor does Schleiermacher tell us why this dynamis functions so differently in its person-forming activity in reference to the figure of Jesus (a solitary instance--a break in the process) and in its community-forming activity subsequent to that one point in history.

3. Schleiermacher also left unsolved the moral aspect of the problem of freedom, in reference to the freedom of choice. This is a phase of the ethical weakness of his entire system. The factor of moral purpose did not receive sufficient consideration, nor did the feeling of moral responsibility which accompanies man's ethical decisions. In such a deterministic system of thought, this aspect of the problem of freedom is too significant to have been passed over so lightly by Schleiermacher.

4. Our comparison is also interesting and illuminating in that a careful consideration of Schleiermacher's idea of grace in

the light of major, preceding interpretations reveals the fact that the wisdom of the historic church has regarded the religious value of forgiveness as central in that reality signified by the term "grace." One may well urge that the term "forgiveness" is only of analogical significance in man's experience of divine reality; and to be sure, all concepts or truths are of such analogical or instrumental character. Yet the reality which, in man's experience of worship, seems to be most adequately apprehended and appropriated by means of the concept of forgiveness is profoundly significant, if the wisdom of the historic church means anything.

It was this wisdom which Schleiermacher claimed to be explicating. Yet he was led to make this value peripheral and wholly negative in significance. He saw nothing of positive significance in the idea of forgiveness. This has helped by way of contrast to bring out this central conviction of the historic church, a conviction which I believe is also empirically verifiable. Schleiermacher's interpretation does not take account of the fact that the genius of the Christian religion seems to lie in the empirically verifiable insight into the character of the working of the divine which enables man to transcend his ethical failures, a working which is always bringing man into a better life and a better world. This positive aspect of the fundamental Christian doctrine of forgiveness was not adequately appreciated by Schleiermacher.

Yet we have not been unmindful of the many affinities of Schleiermacher's view with those of his evangelical predecessors with whom he claimed to stand identified.

